

# I

As a Private Dick, a duck is surprisingly effective. People say things in front of a duck you wouldn't believe. Of course, I'm not just any duck. Not some dumb white Pekin, some barnyard quacker. I'm a Mallard, a Silky Mallard. If you saw me, you would want me. I look soft. It's misleading. There's steel beneath my feathers. I have presence. My head is iridescent green.

Which makes it difficult to dress down. For that I have Stu. Stu's a bird of the wingless persuasion. He claims he found me but of course I found him. And in a city of three million, that took some doing. Finding Stu I guess was my very first case.

But first cases are boring. The random clues. The inevitable stumbles. The damsel in distress who ends up packing a mean gun. The flickering neon on rain-damp streets. The solace of a gloomy bar. The making of one's peace with betrayal. Her name was Lati. She looked like a bowling pin in a fright wig. But they say the first burn scars the worst.

She left Stu with a terrible limp. She "tripped and fell" him down a steep metal staircase. When he saw me at the bottom, he almost jumped out of his skin. It took me a while to calm him down. Get him used to the presence of non-malignant feathers. But by the time he was healed, we were well-nigh inseparable. Friends joked that he had imprinted on me, that he thought I was his mother. People like that, who can't tell a drake from a hen, really, they shouldn't be allowed to breed.

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Expectation's the problem. People want a PI, they got their hearts set on a seedy upstairs office. But I have not met a landlord that would rent an office to a duck. So I use Echo Park. You got your swans. You got your geese. You got your "Quack! Quack! Look Mommy, duckies!" Instant undercover. I fit right in. Plus the price is right. Weather's usually fine. Only risk is some *nino* trying to stuff me with a half-stale burrito. What is it with you humans always force-feeding ducks? Don't these feathers

make me look fat? Well, yeah. So don't tell me it's goodwill; it's *Beijing Kao Ya* or *Canard a l'orange* or some other fowl-based entree... Around every corner, Julia Child with her pump.

But I digress. Which I will do. Have you ever seen a duck swim? Yeah, lotta tacking, no straight lines, so deal with it. Anyway, someone was looking for something; that's how it always starts. And they haven't got a clue, but that's okay. That's your personal forte. You creep and you see where the somethings are. Because that's what the job really is. Providing a different perspective. Some of the best flatfeet are flounders. It has to do with the eyes.

But they're specialists, you know. Limited. Gotta always have easy access to liquid. Buried treasures. Drownings. That's their cup of tea. And then the Sam Spades of the world, hey, they're pretty much entirely land-based. You want to cover *all* the angles, then you hire me. And Stu of course. Stu's the one on the bench, shredding my rejected burrito for the pigeons. You sit down beside him, tell him your tale of woe. I'm the pet. Or one more scavenger. Hey, I don't care what you think of me; I'm there to listen. And this is what I hear you say:

"The paleta man says sometimes you find things." Stu just nods. Tosses a bit of *frijole* over to Gladys. Gladys is quite a good asset. She kicks the *frijole* to me.

"I lost something. I lost a ring." Gladys perks up at that. Gladys is mad for round shiny baubles. She keeps thinking one day I'll give her one. But pigeons aren't my thing.

"Where'd you lose the ring?" says Stu. I trained him well.

"If I knew that, I don't think I would need you."

"A ring is small. The city is large."

Sometimes Stu goes gnomic. His last job was writing for the Luck Wing Cookie Company. I've tried to break him of inscrutability but it's really really hard.

"Are you... Charlie Chan?"

"No, my name's Stu. This is my duck, Mallard Lowenstein."

"The name sounds familiar."

"You're thinking of someone else."

"Hello, duck," he says.

Me, I don't say anything. If I did, the guy would probably have a coronary and pfft, there goes another gig. So I hold my tongue. Hey, better me than you. I bet you didn't even know we have tongues. Well, we do. You'll see them on too many San Gabriel menus: duck tongues with basil. Disgusting bony little things. Not worth the effort. I suggest you entirely forget about ordering them. Or maybe call up PETA and hoist a threatening sign.

"The ring's on someone's hand."

Oh, back to the case.

"The ring's on someone's *hand*?"

"Yeah."

"So I'd call that a bracelet."

"No. On her finger, on her hand."

"Which finger?"

"I guess... I guess, the ring finger."

"You guess?"

To me, all fingers look the same.

"Did you put it there?"

The man has to think. "No. No, I didn't give it to her."

"Did she steal it?"

"It's not a story like that."

"Then what kind of story is it?"

"I guess... I guess it's a love story."

Gladys gives a little squeal of delight. Of course to the guy, it just sounded like one more pigeon muttering obscenities. Really, it's that idiot bobbing of the head. They're like Tourette birds. 'Get out of the way, get out of the way, asshole.'

"Do you love the girl or love the ring?"

"I love the girl."

"So why did you sit down and start taking about a ring then?"

"I thought it would cost less to find a ring than a girl."

"You're planning to pay me?"

"Well, yeah. If I have to."

"You have to. I've got a really mean boss."

"Can't be so mean if he lets you keep a duck."

“He doesn’t know.” The guy nods at that. “So... does the girl love *you*?”

“I don’t know... No. Well... She would if she knew I existed.”

“This isn’t a love story. This is, like, a stalker story.”

“No, it’s not a story like that.”

“So what kind of a story is it?” Stu is a saint. By now I would have throttled this would-be client. And again he had to forage for words. I tried to envision his brain: a murky swamp of weedy, half-sunk vowels, dismembered consonants...

“She’s my sister. We were separated when we were kids. Really little kids. She was probably too little even to know that.”

“And what’s the ring got to do with it?”

“The ring belonged to our mom.”

“Ah, and your mother died, and you two were separated, farmed out to foster care. If you were lucky you were adopted.”

“She was lucky. I wasn’t. But I’m okay now. And I want to know she is.”

“And she’s got the ring.”

“That’s how I’ll know her. That’s how she’ll know me. I can describe it. She used to wear it on a chain around her neck. By now, she could wear it on her, you know... she could be wearing it on her finger.”

“Or maybe she’s still wearing it around her neck.”

“I suppose.”

“Or maybe she lost it. Or maybe it got sold.”

“It couldn’t be valuable. We had no dough. It was just... pretty.”

“Okay, describe it.”

“It was gold, well something goldish. I guess fake gold. And it had a blue stone. The stone was carved like a flower. It was probably fake too. Yeah, it was probably just plastic. But she loved that ring.”

“Who did?”

“My mother. But she loved Sissy more and so she got it.”

“So... your mother didn’t love you?”

“Of course she did!” The guy was mad.

“So what did she give *you*?”

The guy looked right at him. I had to admire that: his two eyes boring straight in. Such an act is totally beyond me. It comes of having eyes on opposite sides of my head.

“She gave me her blessing. She said ‘Henry, you are the man of the family. Take care of your sister.’ But I didn’t. And now I have to make that right.”

Stu looked over at me. We have our signals. I gave the “why now?” signal and Stu asked the question.

Timing is almost always the key to every case. This guy was thirty, thirty-one easy. A lot of years had gone by since his mother had placed that blessing that sounded more like a curse on his young head. What had brought him to our park bench today?

“It’s always in my head. *She’s* always in my head. She used to love to sit beside me, put her little hand in my pocket. I’d read her stories. All these years she must have thought I just walked away. And then the paleta man said you found his dog and I thought maybe... I thought at least I could talk to you. I thought if you didn’t think you could find her, you might know somebody who could...”

And then I got it. The guy was just one of those millions who live underwater. They can barely make out through the pond scum that there’s a whole world up above. Where people are getting rich and scoring goals and swiveling their hips and selling cars and sodas and crap on the TV. While underwater it’s just one day bleeding into the next. Just trying to survive. No real future. The scary knowledge you can’t take a breath because there isn’t any oxygen. Sure, there were lawyers and judges and people that could track his sister down. But all he had was us. One haunted fortune-cookie writer on a park bench. And a duck with severe Attention Deficit Disorder. What were gum shoes anyway? Could you chew them? Did they make them for webbed feet?

We took the case.